

FAKING IT FOR REAL: PERFORMATIVITY, 'AUTHENTICITY', AND THE TEACHING SELF

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Introduction

The social media landscape has fundamentally reshaped the conventional and still commonplace notion of 'authenticity,' raising pressing questions over how educators might construct credible and compelling personas to facilitate student learning online. Such questions are now more important than ever in an environment where the global COVID-19 pandemic has enticed countless more teachers to explore the potentialities of the digital world for engaging with students, colleagues, and other stakeholders. This visual essay explores this issue through an examination of the author's own construction of a 'teaching self' on various social media platforms, particularly through the lens of the shelfie. The roles of performativity, playfulness, and the potential for repurposing content are shown to shed light on the complexities of what it means to convey an 'authentic' persona online.



Figure 1: A shelfie, taken 14 January 2021.

Satisfactory lighting; semi-competent framing; amateur attempt at humour via exaggerated facial expression. This photograph may be perceived by some to be 'authentic', but its performative nature also raises the question of what exactly 'authenticity' means. This theme is unpacked here in relation to the digital construction of a teaching self through an autoethnographic approach

(Ellis 2004). Given the nature of the media drawn on in what follows, the approach bears similarities to the form of micro-autoethnography applied recently in game studies, where 'short events,' often conveyed in multimedia form, are central to the self-reflection (McArthur, 2019, p. 32).

No matter what form they take, mediated identity performances are never 'unfiltered' in the pure sense that is typically implied, but comprise what Gunn Enli conceptualises as 'authenticity illusions' (2015, p. 1). Resisting the tendency to render 'authenticity' a placeholder for 'reality' or 'truthfulness', Smith and Watson likewise stress that 'virtual environments only make clearer the critique made by poststructural theorists that all self-presentation is performative, that authenticity is an effect, not an essence' (2014, p. 75). Governed by ever-changing conventions and perceptions, 'authenticity' is always contingent and seldom uniform, and social media has long seen 'emotional and intellectual resonance' take precedence over concerns about 'truth and fakeness' (Christian 2009).



Figure 2: Tweet posted on teaching account, 4 December 2020.
<https://twitter.com/digitalzones/status/1334833003315412994>

The recent sector-wide upheaval amidst COVID-19 campus shutdowns only exacerbates the importance of exploring how educators present and perform themselves (or rather, their selves) online. Whether or not social media is harnessed for student learning directly, the plethora of



Figure 4: Instagram post on teaching account, taken 23 September 2019.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/B2vC2HeAb0I/>

Playing as a Meddler-in-the-Middle and the Shelfie as Teaching Meta-Performance

Part of my personal-professional brand as a lecturer has relied for almost a decade on my inclusion of my board game collection in the background of photographs, YouTube vlogs, live broadcasts, and TikTok videos I have created to engage students. Indeed, the video thumbnails visible on certain media may be seen to comprise a form of 'shelfie' in themselves – as do the ritual taking of Zoom meeting screenshots or video captures with colleagues, industry practitioners, or students to fulfil one or more functions: to encourage participation, promote research, showcase teaching activities, or advertise events.



Figure 5: Instagram post on teaching account, taken 7 March 2021.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CMGs1RSgO2R/>

Through this multi-platfomed approach to delivering learning resources and assessment advice, I position myself as what Erica McWilliam coined a ‘Meddler-in-the-Middle’, as opposed to the ‘Sage-on-the-Stage’ model of a teacher who distributes learning and the ‘Guide-by-the-Side’ facilitator whose strategies can too readily lean toward passivity. The meta-category of ‘Meddling-in-the-Middle’ describes an ‘active interventionist pedagogy in which teachers are mutually involved with students in assembling and/or dis-assembling knowledge and cultural products’ (2009, p. 288). Indeed, the self-reflexive nature of making social media content frequently affords opportunities to explore the complexity of online performativity and ‘authenticity’.



Figure 6: Tweet posted on teaching account, 10 April 2018.
<https://twitter.com/digitalzones/status/983503329962569729>

The machinations of 2020 and beyond have exposed the neatly (or messily) stacked bookshelves of countless journalists, academics, and other commentators forced to record themselves on webcams while working from home. While unreliable internet connections and family interruptions mid-Zoom have often provided 'humanising' moments, the pervasiveness of book collections has only reinforced the trope of the learned person as being surrounded by wisdom set down on the page by those who came before. Further, while the 'teaching self' has long been recognised as 'often overlooked but also potentially extremely influential in wider *micro-publics*' (Barbour and Marshall, 2012), limited attention continues to be given to the subject of educator personas – even in those monographs that focus on digital work in academia (Carrigan 2019; Weller 2011).



Figure 7: Tweet posted on teaching account, 9 August 2018.
<https://twitter.com/digitalzones/status/1027298507906924544>

My decision to line my shelves with tabletop games rather than books serves multiple purposes. First, my chosen shelfie setting might be perceived by some to subvert the stereotypical persona of a grey-bearded, tie-wearing lecturer – as [one observer blogged](#) at length about my online identity (Hanlon, 2017). Second, the connotations of playfulness engendered in gaming fit neatly with the role of creativity and experimentation in social media-making. Given that ‘the self is an effect of representation – the affordances, strategies, techniques, and intended audiences – rather than one’s identity being expressed through online practices’ (Poletti and Rak 2014, p. 6), playful experimentation is pivotal to *discovering oneself in the making*. And lastly, the subversive playfulness, or playful subversiveness, of these performances again raises the question of what it means to be ‘authentic’ online.

One Last Shelfie: Strategic Stage Management and Being 'Real' Online



Figure 8: Instagram post on teaching account, 1 March 2019.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BudE1f1AvXR/>

Spontaneous moments in media-making are often viewed by audiences as 'authentic' due to their seemingly unplanned nature; however, this by no means suggests performativity is not a pivotal part of the process. Let's return to Smith and Watson's conceptualisation of 'authenticity' as artifice; as 'manufactured' stage management (2014, p. 75). Shedding any pretension – at least to oneself – that you might or even can portray what is simplistically called 'the real/true you' may, paradoxically, be a valuable step in enhancing the likelihood of being perceived as 'authentic'. Indeed, layers might be added to performances of a single shelfie in a way that drastically alters context and meaning, but nowhere can more 'truth' be found in one performance over another.



*Figure 9: Tweet posted on teaching account, 14 January 2021.
<https://twitter.com/digitalzones/status/1349562042072485891>*



Figure 10: Instagram post on teaching account, 16 January 2021.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CKF6aHwgISo/>

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